

*God on the Move: Preparing to Give an Answer*

Colossians 4: 2 – 6 & 1 Peter 3: 15 – 16

Doesn't everybody like a good story? Whether we read it in a book, a newspaper or magazine, read someone's blog, watch a TV drama, see the latest social media feed, or hear our friend's latest, don't we all like a good story? All stories have a beginning, some kind of climax - usually a crisis - and then a conclusion, a resolution of said crisis. Most of us probably like our stories to have happy endings.

In my mum's generation, all school children in the UK knew their Bible stories. That may no longer be the case; but the story of God and his love for his people remains and will always remain the greatest story ever told. Into that grand story, I hope that each of us could tell our little story within it: of how God has worked and continues to work in our lives...

Our current UK society has been called 'postmodern'. In the 'modernist' era of my mum's generation people were much more likely to accept 'facts' and the 'truth' than they are now. Professional people such as doctors and teachers were greater respected as people who had knowledge to impart. But in my generation, and even more so in that of my children, the authority of 'fact' and 'truth' is challenged. What people do like though is personal stories, which have spread more quickly with increased use of the internet. People are allowed to have a personal 'truth' for themselves. There are many 'truths' in our pluralist culture all vying for attention... Into these numerous conversations, people are usually happy to hear our stories too, including what we personally believe... People in wider society are looking for spirituality ... They're just less likely to think of coming into a church building to find it ...

This is the sixth week in our series called *God on the Move*, looking at how we, as followers of Jesus, can join in with what God is already doing to make this world more like his kingdom, the kingdom of heaven: how we can show his love to the people we meet ...

A few weeks ago I traced the movement of God from Jesus coming to earth to 'bring good news to the poor', to him sending out his first disciples, to his command that all his followers, both then and now, 'make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'. He reassures us that he 'will be with us' as we do this. Last week we looked at spiritual gifts given to each of us by God. Although we are not all specialist *evangelists*, we are all meant to *evangelise*, to demonstrate our belief in Jesus. This is what we are focusing on today.

Towards the end of his letter to the church at Colosse, the apostle Paul gives them instructions about their prayer and behaviour. He tells them to 'devote themselves to prayer'. Sadly, this devotion isn't always seen in our churches today, but it should be the foundation of all we do. We won't get far unless we lean into God for his leading.

Paul goes on to ask for prayer for himself and his team. This is showing a distinction between his team's role and that of the people in the churches. Paul is an apostle. We saw last week how this meant that he was one of the few specially chosen by Christ for a specific mission of God. Although Paul hadn't met Jesus during his physical time on earth, he had heard Jesus' voice on the Damascus Road and was thereby transformed from someone who attacked Christians into a pioneer of mission to those who weren't part of the Jewish community, the Gentiles. Paul has a fantastic story to tell! His role was that of church planter and regional minister, travelling around and writing to various churches, sorting out their problems, showing them how to live for Jesus and proclaiming the good news of Jesus' resurrection again and again. He frequently suffered being imprisoned because of this work and would eventually be killed for it. Today we should be engaged in prayer for missionaries, pioneers and regional ministers who are doing a specific job and making the associated sacrifices, beyond that of the 'ordinary' Christian.

However, Paul also has some practical instructions for the Colossians and for us. 'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders', he says. 'make the most of every opportunity.' This is about how the people of the church should act towards those who aren't part of it. He emphasises that this will require wisdom. Elsewhere he speaks of Jesus' followers as being 'ambassadors' for Christ: we represent him in this world. An ambassador for the UK would want to present the UK in a positive way when visiting a foreign country. He would wish to behave and speak in a way that would incline people to think well of the UK. If 'foreigners' to Christ, those who don't believe in him, see those who bear his name, Christians, arguing amongst themselves or being selfish, unkind or judgemental about people, they will be far less likely to think that being a follower of Jesus makes a difference or is about a full, free and flourishing life, rather than just rules and condemnation. Paul tells us to take opportunities to show the goodness of God. If we go to God in prayer, he can show us how to do this. How can we demonstrate Jesus' love in a given situation? How can we shine his light, as he told us to do; show something positive?

Next Paul writes of our spoken words. 'Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.' Paul is writing in Greek and the ancient Greek understanding of 'grace' was 'pleasant speech'. In the Hebrew Proverbs, which Paul would have known well, it says 'A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger'. When responding to people's questions about our faith, how can we speak gently to encourage them, rather than telling them harshly that they're wrong and provoking their anger? This is not to compromise what the Bible teaches. It does teach

that Jesus is the only way to fullness of life now and for eternity. But how we communicate this, at the right time, is very important. Paul's injunction to 'saltiness' of speech reminds us that Jesus told us to be both 'salt' and 'light'. Salt gives flavour and it preserves. Our speech should stand out, be exciting, be long-lasting.

Peter also writes to the early church on the subject of speaking about Jesus. His letter which we call 1 Peter is written to a church suffering persecution under the Roman Empire. Yet Peter encourages them not to be afraid, reminding them to 'set apart Christ as Lord'. Just as Paul told the church to keep a foundation of prayer, so Peter tells the church of his time, as well as ours, to begin with God. If Jesus is first in our lives, then all else will follow, including how we speak to others about him. Peter states, 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.' When we become followers of Jesus, we receive a hope that we did not previously have. Hope that Jesus is always with us, whatever we are going through in life, and hope that he is in the process of redeeming the world and it will be put right one day. So, if people ask us why we are Christians, we can tell them these reasons for our hope. Sometimes people will ask us more difficult questions and we will look at those next week. But God with us and God as redeemer are the basic reasons for why faith in Jesus makes life so much better.

In a similar way to Paul, Peter tells the church to speak about Jesus 'with gentleness and respect'. We have all fallen short of being the people God would want us to be, so we shouldn't condemn others harshly. We should also have respect for their individual circumstances and beliefs, whether they believe in a different faith, have no faith or just don't know what to believe. They may have grown up in circumstances very different to our own. For example, in some UK communities where marriage is virtually non-existence, it wouldn't help to begin by talking about people 'living in sin' with a partner. We could, however, talk about loving relationships between people and about how God loves us. Peter also writes about Christian behaviour. People may speak ill of followers of Jesus, he says, but if we do everything we should according to our consciences, then we can know that their criticism is unfounded.

My prayer is that we will be bold in telling our stories, of how God has and is working in our lives. Then, when people ask us why we have hope in Jesus, we can confidently tell them: God is with us, and he is in the process of turning the world back to the way it should be. Let us all be preparing, to be ready for opportunities, to answer the questions when they come and to be demonstrating God's love, his salt and light, in our actions towards others. Our faith is not something to be kept secret, but to be shown to everyone we meet. May God give us wisdom in how we behave and how we speak. Let us play our part in the telling of the greatest story ever told.